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Drug Rehabilitation agencies Straight Inc.

Ex-counselors: 'Straight' boss forced them from o

By WILLIAM NOTTINGHAM
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

Two former counselors with a Pinellas County drug treatment program sued the corporation Wednesday, claiming that their former boss "maliciously" had them fired from jobs with a Clearwater retirement home.

It was the second legal complaint filed in recent weeks against Straight Inc., which is being investigated by state health officials for allegedly mistreating some of its clients.

The former counselors are Deborah Lynn Solanes, 19, and Diana Lynn Shanahan, 20, both members of Straight's founding para-professional treatment staff.

Executive Director James E. Hartz also is named as a defendant. The Circuit Court action seeks a jury trial and damages of more than \$2,500.

The women worked as drug counselors for more than

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nine months but resigned last summer after a dispute with Hartz and other program leaders.

The two found new jobs at the Osceola Inn retirement home. Their new supervisor coincidentally had children enrolled in Straight.

Hartz allegedly instructed the administrator to fire the two women or he would not permit the administrator's children "to visit with their mother," the suit says.

As a result, the suit says, the women were fired "without cause . . . humiliated, embarrassed and ridiculed by (their) peers" and became "sick and distraught due to the finan-

cial difficulties encountered as a result of being unemployed."

Hartz was unavailable for comment.

But the retirement home administrator — not named as a defendant — denied the allegations.

"Oh no, that's not true," she said. She confirmed firing the former drug counselors but said it was not done at Hartz's orders.

She said the two women frequently discussed their dispute with Straight while on the job in Clearwater, and "it was disruptive."

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In early November, a Clearwater youth filed a federal civil rights suit against Straight, Hartz and two other persons. The action claimed that he was falsely imprisoned, kidnaped, and illegally searched and assaulted while being admitted to the program.

Hartz denied that suit's allegations and said that it stemmed from a domestic dispute between the youth's parents.

Meanwhile, investigators with the State Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services have been interviewing several current and former Straight officials and clients about allegations of mistreatment.

The examination was sparked, officials said, by a series of articles published earlier this month in *The St. Petersburg Times*.

Their report is due by the end of this week, officials have said.